

USS AZ_OHC_#345 Robert W. Andre

Transcription Date: 09//09 - Transcriber: abg

[BEGIN AUDIO]

DAN: ... 'teenth, 1994, at 12:00 in the afternoon, by the National [INDISCERNABLE] Service at the American Memorial, in cooperation with Marianas Cable Vision. The subject is Robert Warren Andre, Veteran of the Marianas Campaign. The Interviewer is Dan Martinez, Historian for the National Park Service at the U. S. S. Arizona Memorial in Hawaii. Good morning--Robert, [OVERLAPPING] good afternoon! I guess it's afternoon already.

ROBERT: Good Morning. Yeah, it is 11:00 a.m.

DAN: For the record, could you please state your full name; and, could you spell for us your last name?

ROBERT: "Robert Warren Andre—A N D R E."

DAN: And Robert, where were you born?

ROBERT: Richmond, California.

DAN: And what was the date on that?

ROBERT: January 31, 1926.

DAN: What were your parents named?

ROBERT: My mother was Dorothy Jane [SOUNDS LIKE] Gingler Andre, and my father was Raymond Gilbert Andre.

DAN: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

ROBERT: Umhum, a wonderful older brother and a great younger brother.

DAN: So, three boys in the family?

ROBERT: Three boys, uh huh.

DAN: Bet that kept your mother busy?

ROBERT: I think I was the one who kept her busy.

DAN: You were the oldest?

ROBERT: Middle.

DAN: Middle. What was it like growing up? Did you grow up in Oakland, California?

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ROBERT: Yeah, we moved to Oakland. It was alright. My mother and father divorced when I was quite young.

DAN: Was that tough on you?

ROBERT: It [SOUNDS LIKE] wasn't for a happy household. We just had our real problems that way, but it worked out.

DAN: Your mother had to work and raise you at the same time?

ROBERT: No, she remarried shortly after that.

DAN: Boy, that can be tough [OVERLAPPING].

ROBERT: During the Depression time, yeah.

DAN: You have a new dad, and ...

ROBERT: Um hum. Did that go well, or was that a little hard on you too?

DAN: Did that go well, or was that a little hard on you too?

ROBERT: No, it was absolutely wonderful for me. I just loved him dearly.

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: Fabulous man.

DAN: Are your mom and dad ... Are they still alive?

ROBERT: No, my father passed away, I guess, in the 50's.

DAN: Uh huh.

ROBERT: My mother passed away—42, I believe it was—like February, March (something like that), 1942.

DAN: Really?

ROBERT: Um hum.

DAN: So, in a sense, you lost your original parents—either through divorce or through death?

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: What was it like going to High School in Oakland?

ROBERT: I did go a little bit.

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DAN: Ha, ha, ha.

ROBERT: I went to about the 10th grade, I think it was; then, my mother passed away, so I just didn't show up. I went to work in the shipyard.

DAN: What did you do in the shipyard?

ROBERT: I was a Coppersmith Helper.

DAN: Uh huh. So, you got your education (which is, in some cases, maybe a better education) working and kind of achieving those kind of skills to get you by in life?

ROBERT: Well after the Service, I did continue High School, and finished that. And then I did take courses from the universities and colleges.

DAN: Right.

ROBERT: [OVERLAPPING] ... for the work I was in at the time.

DAN: How long did you work in the Naval shipyard?

ROBERT: Oh, that was just about four months is all, and I was leading-up-to try to get into the Marine Corps.

DAN: Why did you choose the Marines?

ROBERT: A sixteen year old boy wants to get in where the action is. He doesn't realize that others shoot too.

DAN: Sixteen years old? How did you get into the military at sixteen?

ROBERT: Kind of embarrassing, asking that question. I'll try to answer the best I can. When my mother passed away, my stepfather went right into the Navy. He was of that age; and my oldest brother, he stayed home—eventually/subsequently went into the Merchant Marine—and my father came and got my younger brother. I wouldn't go with him, I stayed on my own. So when I went down to join the Marine Corps, they realized I wasn't seventeen years old (even though I told them I was). They ... I told them I had no mother and no father, so they sent me to the (I believe it was the) Probation Office, and said, "tell them, and they'll take you to a judge, and

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he'll sign the probation officer as my temporary guardian for one day, to sign me into the Corps." That's how I got in the Marine Corps.

DAN: I've never heard a story like that. It's amazing. And so, you got into the Corps.

ROBERT: Um hum.

DAN: Sixteen years old—that's pretty young!

ROBERT: I didn't go in at sixteen.

DAN: Okay.

ROBERT: I went down after that, and joined the Marine Corps with this probation officer, and that's when the Marine Corps caught the difference—that I wasn't seventeen, I was only sixteen.

DAN: What did they do?

ROBERT: They told me to go [INDISCERNABLE] ... They [INDISCERNABLE]... ... [INDISCERNABLE] went back February 15th. They called me January 31st; I turned seventeen; and February 15th I went to San Diego.

DAN: And, were you at Camp Elliot, or Pendleton?

ROBERT: Pendleton.

DAN: Pendleton. What was Boot Camp like?

ROBERT: I enjoyed it. I had companions. Getting used to the routine was hard for the first few days.

DAN: What was the routine like?

ROBERT: Well—up early.

DAN: How early?

ROBERT: Five, six o'clock.

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: ... having to be sure that everything is where it belongs. And when you're not used to doing that for about four months between ... When my mother was alive, we had to keep everything nice and neat and clean—make your own beds. But then,

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that four-month or five-month period in there, I was kind of free, and I kind of got a little lax. But they straightened me out fast!

DAN: Yeah, kept you squared-away, as they say, right?

ROBERT: Yeah, they sure did.

DAN: What were the drill instructors like?

ROBERT: Well, they were doing their job to impress us and make us take orders, which was hard for some of them to do. I really didn't mind it. It made it easy for me. I didn't have to do much thinking.

DAN: Right. They're pretty tough guys, though, aren't they?

ROBERT: Well, verbally, yes. They didn't do anything physically to us, but ...

DAN: You worked in the Naval shipyard, so perhaps you were ready for that language, perhaps?

ROBERT: Oh, yeah. I don't remember any real bad language, though; but, hollering and yelling, that's about all. They stick their face in your face, and start hollering at you. You just stand there and listen to them until they're finished, and do what they tell you to do!

DAN: "Yes Sergeant," right?

ROBERT: Huh?

DAN: "Yes, Sergeant, [OVERLAPPING] ..."

ROBERT: Yes, "Yes sir." No, not "Sergeant, "Yes sir."

DAN: "Yes sir." Okay. When you came out of Boot Camp, obviously the war was underway. Did you have any fear for yourself, or like many young men, felt that "it would be the other guy;" or maybe, you wouldn't get killed in all of this?

ROBERT: I don't believe I gave it any thought at all, other than getting in the Corps, and getting into action. As far as any fear, when you're seven--"I don't know fear. I don't think"—that kind of fear.

DAN: Um hum. When you left Camp Pendleton, where did you go?

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ROBERT: Well as you probably know, before you leave a boot camp they assign you to different units. I was assigned to the first Amphibious Tank Corps that was being formed.

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: So, they sent me to what they called “Jack’s Farm,” to learn how to drive light, then medium tanks.

DAN: The light tanks were Stuart Tanks, as I remember?

ROBERT: I really don’t remember [OVERLAPPING] the name

DAN: And then they ... [OVERLAPPING]

ROBERT: [PHONETIC] Haffal.

DAN: Yeah, the heavier tanks were the Sherman.

ROBERT: Sherman, yeah. Seventy-five, I think they had a little smaller than that—a thirty-five caliber cannon on ‘em.

DAN: Well, it beats walk’in doesn’t it?

ROBERT: Well, I thought so; except the cab had no hot water-- ...

DAN: Ha, ha, ha.

ROBERT: ... only in the galley.

DAN: So, what did that mean to you?

ROBERT: That we showered in cold water.

DAN: Ha, ha, ha.

ROBERT: I do remember that!

DAN: “That’s a chilling experience,” as they say.

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: The tanks can be very hot and uncomfortable. Did you get used to that?

ROBERT: I was only there, probably, a few months, ...

DAN: Um hum.

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ROBERT: ... so there wasn't any real need to get used to the hot weather; but I may not need [OVERLAPPING] ...

DAN: You know, when you're buttoned-down, [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: ... it gets pretty hot in a tank. What did you do in that tank?

ROBERT: Well, we were all taught to be drivers, [OVERLAPPING] ...

DAN: Uh huh.

ROBERT: and gunners, and commanders; so, you filled-in all four positions.

DAN: For those that don't know, why would they teach you all those ...

ROBERT: Fill-in, in case something happened to one of the others, ...

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: ... and they first start you out as assistant driver, then the driver; then they put you at a turret; and then you're up there as a commander, controlling the driver with your feet.

DAN: Now, how do you drive a tank? Is there a steering wheel inside, or what?

ROBERT: Well, it's like driving a tractor, in the "old days," when you'd brake one side, the other track would continue to drive, and it would spin-around to either the right or the left, depending on what side you pull-back—what track you stop.

DAN: So, applying these brakes steer you [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Yes, these would be the brakes, these long levers.

DAN: When you're done with tank training, where do you go from there?

ROBERT: Well, actually, we had finished all our basic tank training, and then we were just a matter of start training others. We were waiting for the amphibious tanks to be ... They were on a drafting board. So we finished our basic in tanks, and then we were just sitting around, training new ones coming in. Then from there, I ended up in the Infantry.

DAN: You ended up in the Infantry? You didn't stay with tanks?

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ROBERT: No, they came around one day, and "painted a real nice picture" of going to Camp Elliot; and had barracks; it had hot 'n cold water, china, linen; everybody had had their room to themselves; so, a friend of mine and I volunteered.

DAN: And when you got to Camp Elliot, how much of that came true?

ROBERT: Well, we did get the hot water. We got the hot water, yeah.

DAN: Ha, ha, ha. So, they "sold you a bill of goods," is what you're telling me?

ROBERT: Yep, they sure did.

DAN: And you ended up in the Infantry.

ROBERT: Yes.

DAN: Of course, the experience for amphibious tanks was not a pleasant one in many cases?

ROBERT: Later on, I think it was this island here, is where they first used 'em, I believe, out here; because I remember running into fellows that I trained with in the Tank Corps. I was now a rated man. I was a PFC. They were all platoon and staff sergeants, ...

DAN: Gees.

ROBERT: ... because they were the first in the unit, so they rated 'em.

DAN: Yeah. There was recently, there was of course, the observances at Normandy; and of course, the experience for amphibious tanks there had been horrific. I mean out of, I think, forty-some or thirty-five-some tanks, that only three of those made the beach, and they had some terrible problems with them being swamped. There's a Sherman that sits in the water out here, as well.

ROBERT: Yeah. I think there's two of them, isn't there?

DAN: [OVERLAPPING] Yeah, there's two. So, you go back in the Infantry. When are you finally shipped overseas?

ROBERT: Well, after they re-trained us there, they gave us each the BAR in one clip, and put us on the firing line; and then, those of use that they picked to be a BAR

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Man, they trained us in that particular weapon. They I went to New Zealand as a replacement on a ship called The [PHONETIC] Salmandyke.

DAN: Was that Dutch—one of those Dutch freighters?

ROBERT: Yes, a Dutch freighter, yeah. And, it must have been in late September, [INDISCERNABLE] getting pretty chilly there. Yeah.

DAN: Yeah. New Zealand is beautiful. They say that's beautiful country. Do you remember it that way?

ROBERT: I remember just the camp, mainly. I did go to Wellington a few times on liberty. At seventeen years old, I was only interested in candy and a show; and so, when I got that one day off a week, if I had a quarter or a dollar, that's what I would do.

DAN: You'd go to the movie house [OVERLAPPING], ...

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: ... and kind of relax, and ...

ROBERT: ... buy a ticket ... You had to buy a seat ahead of time, ...

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: We'd go down and buy a bag of candy for a Shilling.

DAN: Had you ever been in the Pacific before, or sailed the Pacific?

ROBERT: [OVERLAPPING] No, no, no ...

DAN: Pretty vast, expansive water out there.

ROBERT: Took us thirty-one days to get to New Zealand.

DAN: How about seasickness? You ever have an experience with that?

ROBERT: Very much so, and I still do.

DAN: Oh you still ... [OVERLAPPING]

ROBERT: Never did get over it. I get seasick all the time.

DAN: Some people do, and some people don't.

ROBERT: I wear those patches when I go on cruises, but that makes you nauseated.

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DAN: Ha, ha, ha. It's a "can't win" situation, or ...

ROBERT: For me, anyway.

DAN: When you came out here to the Pacific, what was your first experience at combat? Was it here at Saipan, or ...?

ROBERT: No, Tarawa.

DAN: You were at Tarawa?

ROBERT: Yes, um hum.

DAN: What wave did you land in, or were you a Reserve?

ROBERT: I was a Reserve Unit. Our 1st Battalion, 6th Marines; and those days I was what they called D Company—Machine Gun Company. I went from BAR to Machine Gun, but that was another story. That happened when we landed in New Zealand; but anyway, I ended up in Machine Gun Company, and when we landed, I went in D plus 1 on Green Beach ...

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: ... in rubber boats.

DAN: In rubber boats?

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: ... because they were having trouble with the Amtraks getting hung-up and things like that [INDISCERNABLE] ...

ROBERT: We got trouble with the rubber boat getting ashore, because they sunk it.

DAN: "They," meaning, the Japanese?

ROBERT: Yeah. Um hum. We were pretty close, and they put enough bullets in the bow to collapse it, and we just went over the side and went ashore.

DAN: What about all the equipment you had?

ROBERT: It went down.

DAN: So you lost your gun?

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ROBERT: Yeah, but there was others ashore. [OVERLAPPING] [SOUNDS LIKE] Each party would bring the stuff in.

DAN: What was Tarawa like when you came ashore? Visually describe it to me, as you remember.

ROBERT: Going in, we were busy paddling; and we were getting some shots, but not a lot, until we got the burst; and we lost our boat, and the gear went over the side. But ashore, right away again ... We went down right away, because we could hear the shooting and seeing bodies all over the place—lots of bodies. We were off our Green Beach; we were more to the left of where we were supposed to have landed. So we had to run down to the point where Green Beach was, and pick up our units down there; get organized; and, we were to the right of the airstrip; and then we went up by the airstrip.

DAN: People who have been at Tarawa said that they have never had an experience like that—it was unequal. How was Tarawa for you?

ROBERT: If you mean comparing it with this battle, it was quite a difference.

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: Quite a difference. There, again, I was last man to Machine Gun Squad, so I only had to worry about carrying two boxes of ammunition, and keeping my [SOUNDS LIKE] Kar Bean cleaned; and, we moved pretty fast. And the only time that we had a problem—one guy was killed. We had crossed the airstrip to support the unit that originally landed. Then when we continued down, I lost a canteen there. I thought I was shot, but it was just water. We continued down, and ...

DAN: You mean, a bullet hit your canteen?

ROBERT: Yeah, on my fanny pack, yeah—put a hole through the canteen. I thought I was hit, and I went down. A guy told me, “You’re not hit. That’s not blood, that’s just water! Come on.” That ended that.

DAN: That must have been a pretty frightening experience, wasn’t it?

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ROBERT: For the moment I thought I was hurt. I thought, "I want to get out of there."

DAN: So, you felt that dampness, and you thought it was blood?

ROBERT: I sure did—*mine!*

DAN: Ha, ha, ha.

ROBERT: But anyway, we continued up the left side, and eventually crossed back over to where we belonged; crossed the airstrip again, and got over to the right side to the [SOUNDS LIKE] end of the island which was only another day of battle fighting.

ROBERT: Were you afraid?

DAN: When we talk about being afraid, I have a hard time relating to that [INDISCERNABLE] other than Saipan, here. I was concerned because I was down as close to the ground as I could possibly get; but I wasn't to the point where we couldn't do what we were there to do.

ROBERT: I talked to some of the veterans, and when I asked them that question (maybe you can respond to this), he says, "You know, everything's happening so fast that you don't think about that. It's after it's all over that (this one guy says)—that's when I began to shake and think about what had happened." Do you ever have that experience? Everybody's different.

DAN: Not there I didn't. Not at Tarawa. After the battle, I can remember telling my sergeant, "Gee, that wasn't too bad." He says, "You didn't get hit." The only answer he gave me.

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: Again, I relate that to the age. I don't think things ... I hadn't really lived yet.

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: Well after Tarawa, the Marine Corps certainly had another battle "under their belt," but an experience that was somewhat unequaled up until that point of Marine Corps history here in the Pacific. But the next one was coming, and that was that

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Saipan. Where did you go after Tarawa? Did you go back, or stay out here on the Pacific; or, ...

ROBERT: Well, after the battle, we secured the island. They took a bunch of us down to the rest of the islands to secure those. So, I didn't stay on Tarawa only but a few hours after the battle. I was burial detail for a few hours, then they moved us over to go down the rest of the atolls until our 3rd Battalion—we met them, and they continued down, and we went back to the ship—back to Hawaii, to Hilo.

DAN: Was that tough burying those dead?

ROBERT: What's that?

DAN: Was that tough burying those dead?

ROBERT: I didn't bury 'em; I was picking them up only, with the Chaplin.

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: No. The young man and myself; and that was tough because by that time, they had been there for twenty-four hours, or better; and as you well know, what the results in the Tropics are [INDISCERNABLE] ...

ROBERT: They start decomposing.

DAN: Yeah. Very bad. It wasn't too pleasant—frightening in a way, but not in the way that we were talking about a moment ago.

ROBERT: That was the first time you had ever seen death like that?

DAN: Other than seeing my mother, when she passed away. When I went in with the rubber boats was the first dead one.

ROBERT: Well then, you war continues, and you did a lot of these mop-up actions; and then, how did the preparation for Saipan take place for you?

DAN: Well, as you probably know we were shuffled back to Hilo—the Parker Ranch. They put us up there—not tents yet, just out, and let the CB's build us little cabins—little houses—tents, again. After more training there, and replacements, they board

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us on the LSTs; had us stationed at Honolulu for a while (or not stationed, but gathering there for the task force).

ROBERT: Were you there during the Westlock explosion?

ROBERT: Yes, yes, yes.

DAN: Do you know what LST number ...

ROBERT: I have no idea what number, but I wasn't close enough that it made any difference as far as getting any explosives on us; but, they did cut us loose and get us out of there.

DAN: Okay. There was a group of three LSTs at these [SOUNDS LIKE] piers called T-8s and T-9 and T-10. That's basically where the where the explosions ... And there some other LSTs, more at a cross walker bay and down the channel a little more. Were you, probably, with that group?

ROBERT: Could be.

DAN: Were you a couple thousand yards away from where the explosions [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: I would imagine so.

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: I remember hearing it, and all that going on; but then, again, it didn't really register what was going on. They just got us out of there.

ROBERT: Boy it was something—six LSTs were lost that day.

DAN: Is that how many?

ROBERT: Yeah—close to 700 men killed; 1100 wounded.

DAN: Some of our guys were on those.

ROBERT: Yeah. Yeah, they sure were. So, you saw the explosions, but um ... Well, Operation Forager is now underway, and you're headed toward Saipan. When you got to sea, did they brief you on what was going to happen and give you some materials, and ...

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ROBERT: Well, naturally, keeping us busy. We were on these LSTs, and very crowded. To keep you busy they would have you fill the machine gun belts—sit there with a case of bullets, and just start filling the belts. I kind of lucked-out. They came around and asked you “Who had not served in the galley?” We were supposed to have served thirty days in the galley before we go to our units. Well, I served my thirty days in New Zealand, but I told ‘em, “I didn’t serve my [UNDISCERNABLE] till I went in the galley aboard ship.”

DAN: Get out of those mundane work details, huh?

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: But those LSTs, now, they roll pretty good on the water.

ROBERT: They sure do. I wasn’t feeling too well.

DAN: And working in the galley with all those smells [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Yeah, yeah. But you know, after a few days, you settle down.

DAN: So you were PFC during this time?

ROBERT: Um hum/

DAN: When you finally get to Saipan, could you see the island? Were you guys far enough away to ...

ROBERT: Oh we could see the island [OVERLAPPING] ...

DAN: The bombardment started the day before, and they started laying ‘em in there? That must’ve been quite a show—a pyrotechnic show, probably equal to the fireworks last night, ...

ROBERT: Well, I don’t really remember too much about that other than watching the shelling going on.

ROBERT: How did you come ashore?

DAN: We came ashore in an Amtrak—yeah, I guess an Amtrak.

ROBERT: What wave were you in?

DAN: Second.

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ROBERT: That's when the fire started to get a little hotter.

DAN: Well we were 1st Battalion, and the 2nd and 3rd went in on Red Beach first; and we came in the 2nd wave as the reserve.

ROBERT: Yeah, but were you under fire as you approached the beach?

ROBERT: We were hit. We were hit as we crossed over the reef.

DAN: Where the Amtrak get hit?

ROBERT: The drivers got hit—the front end of it—up there. No one in the back (to my knowledge) was hurt; but, we veered-off to the left ...

DAN: Uh huh.

ROBERT: ... by cutting across the line. It finally stalled off the beach, about, oh ten feet, or something like that.

DAN: And the obvious thing is you all piled out of there, right?

ROBERT: We divested ourselves of the gas masks, first thing; jumped on the side, and left the guns; and we ran the beach and got out. And there was one guy in our squad—big guy—Bob Simpson, or something like that. He calls, "Come back, you need your gun." He had to be very patient. I don't know how he can do that. But he, calling, "Come back!" So, we went there (running, naturally); just hand us our gun.

DAN: And all this gunfire is going on [OVERLAPPING], ...

ROBERT: Yea

DAN: ... bullets whizzing-by?

ROBERT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and not one of us got scratched then either.

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: We went out and got all the group—we [SOUNDS LIKE] ran in individually ...

DAN: So, what kind of guns were you carrying to shore?

ROBERT: Lights—30 Lights.

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DAN: The Browning 30 caliber machine guns?

ROBERT: Um hum/

DAN: And, how far did you move in on the beach to ...

ROBERT: We didn't move very far at all.

DAN: Because the fire was pretty heavy?

ROBERT: Yeah, but not so much that. I'm sure they had a part of it, but we were out of our area; and we were trying to meet up with our group, and the group was down to our right quite a ways.

DAN: Where was your area supposed to be?

ROBERT: It was supposed to be at Red Beach. There's one, two and three, and I'm not sure what number we were on—probably around two or three; but, we were much further left, towards Garapan.

DAN: Did you guys spend the night there, or did you move more inland?

ROBERT: We moved inland right away. As soon as we got down and saw some familiar faces, then we moved inland.

DAN: How are machine guns used? Explain to me what the strategy ... Are they moved to the forward line, and you triangulate fire with another unit; or, how does it all work?

ROBERT: The rifleman, when we get organized, the riflemen are ahead of us, and we're behind 'em; and when they need firepower or get pinned-down or something, they call for the gun, and we come up and lay the machine gun down and ...

DAN: So you kind of leapfrog together then [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: They point out hot pockets, so they want us to ...

DAN: Lay-down a fire?

ROBERT: That's during the daytime while we're advancing. At nighttime, we set up, usually, with our Water Cools (the heavier ones) ...

DAN: Um hum.

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ROBERT: ... that they bring from the rear, and we didn't sandbag 'em down, we just secured them. But they're much heavier and more secure, that way we'd take a field of fire that we would cover.

DAN: I see.

ROBERT: You don't want to go back too far or our people are there.

DAN: The ideal way is to set up these guns so that there is a kind of [OVERLAPPING]
...

ROBERT: Crossfire.

DAN: ... crossfire, ultimately? Did your ... How did the machines guns perform in the Tropics, by the way?

ROBERT: Fine. We had no problem with our guns.

DAN: You have to keep 'em clean, ...

ROBERT: Yeah, any of our weapons, you had to keep clean.

DAN: ... because sand is a problem, right?

ROBERT: Yes. When we came ashore here, they gave us green plastic covers to put over the things.

DAN: They work pretty well?

ROBERT: Our pistol, yeah—over the pistol, our little rifles, and we'd take 'em off when we go to shore, then discard 'em.

DAN: What would be a range of a 30 caliber machine gun—effective one?

ROBERT: Oh boy, I've completely forgotten now.

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: Couldn't begin to tell 'ya.

DAN: One thousand yards, maybe?

ROBERT: Oh, at least that, yeah, ...

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: ... because you can arch 'em, ...

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DAN: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT: ... which we did later on.

DAN: At night would you put tracer rounds in there?

ROBERT: Oh I had tracers every third one.

DAN: Day or night, right?

ROBERT: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

DAN: For people that are unfamiliar with the military; in terms of a tracer, what's a tracer do?

ROBERT: It just gives you a target. You're aiming. It tells you whether you're hitting you target or not. It gives you that general area.

DAN: So, it's like a light beam, almost, going down. It lights-up, and you can follow the path the rounds [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Yeah, and ...

DAN: And every third round is a tracer, then?

ROBERT: That's what I did. Normally, they call for every fourth, ...

DAN: Uh huh.

ROBERT: ... but I want to be sure I'm getting close to my target sooner. It makes a difference!

DAN: Yeah. Machine guns cannot be fired incessantly. They're burst, right?

ROBERT: Bursts, yeah.

DAN: How long would a burst last before it's damaged a gun.

ROBERT: Oh, about a minute—less than that, yeah.

DAN: Um hum. You guys carried extra barrels with you?

ROBERT: No, we didn't. They were always in reserve.

DAN: Okay.

ROBERT: Not for the Water Cools—or, the Air Cools, rather.

DAN: Yeah. When would you have to replace the barrels on something like that.

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ROBERT: Well, I never replaced any. I lost the gun before I ever had to replace a barrel.

DAN: Is that right?

ROBERT: It got hit, and put it out of action.

DAN: Boy, that's a ... With machine gun operators right there; the gun gets hit; that's very close to you.

ROBERT: That's why number one gunners, two gunners don't last very long. How do you think I became a number one gunner?

DAN: I don't know. Let's talk about that. When you landed on the beach, you were a what—a number three gunner?

ROBERT: Number two gunner. Number two, and number one got it right away. Then, I became number one gunner. Then, I lost a couple of two's during different firefights.

DAN: What was the toughest fight you were in here at Saipan?

ROBERT: When I got shot, that was near the end of the battle for me.

DAN: Okay. Why don't you set this all up for me. How did it all happen?

ROBERT: Well, we were on the line, naturally, from the fifteenth--the second wave—we were supposed to be a reserve battalion, but we were always on the line—either with one unit or another unit, we kept moving forward. And we had our quiet days out there, when you could sit and look out at the Pacific, and see the beautiful reefs out there, and maybe pick a mango or a pineapple. But as you'd run into firefights, you had other things on your mind. We had gotten to about July 6th, and we were up near [SOUNDS LIKE] Tanapeg (is that how it's ...),

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: ... and they brought us back because all the units were closing-in at the [INDISCERNABLE], so they pulled us off the front, and marched us back to Garapan, which was flat. And they said, "Just bivwack out here for the time being." Well in the

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morning of the 7th, they blew a bugle. Go right [SOUNDS LIKE] out thing. But they blew a bugle, and they had us board Army trucks, which was a surprise (we usually walked), and they rushed us back up to the front, which we didn't realize that the Japanese had gathered, and run over the 105th, I think, the Army, on the beach there. So they drove us up there, and ...

DAN: They had mounted a big bonsai charge, correct?

ROBERT: That's what I hear, yeah. And they took us up in that general area, then they drove up towards up in the foothills, and we ... The best I can remember, it was a little knoll—a dirt road, a little knoll there--and they had us dismount, and we were on the right side of the road, which was the East side of the island, kind-of, and they told us (we all knew where the front was, but they said the front's on the other side of the road), so don't fire because the Army is up there. We're secondary line, so don't fire, because the Army's there, and we don't want to shoot our own people. That was probably about 4:00 p.m. or so in the afternoon. So, we settled down, and we didn't have any water. What we—just our canteen; no food was brought—we were just rushed-up. So we're sitting down, and I had dug, the best I could, a hole for me and my other gunner, and I lost my gun on the 6th, during the firefight. I was sitting there—my feet in the foxhole. I'm on watch, now, at nighttime. We took turns. And, I'm leaning against a tree—sitting and leaning against a tree. And, it was about 5:30 a.m., thereabouts, getting light, and I looked up, and here's a bunch of people coming at us. And we were not ordered out to fire, and so I kept looking to try identify 'em, and they got, well, from here to about from here to ...What's that, ten feet, from here to that wall? ... before I realized they were the Japanese. And I'm sit'n there, with just my 45 on my lap, with my plastic, green cover over it. Nobody along the line was moving—shooting or anything—so, I hollered, "Japs," and I start firing at point blank, because they were all around us by that time. And then the other guys, they begin to bayonet and hand-to-hand fighting. I didn't do any hand-

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to-hand. The other guys began the hand-to-hand. I was busy with the 45. I emptied my 45, and I didn't realize I had emptied it, but they retreated then. The few that were left retreated. There was probably about twenty to thirty, best I can remember. And when I sat down and was looking around, my 45 had jammed because I had that cover on it, and all the shells were not ejecting out completely, one of them stopped the hammer—the slide—from going forward, which was alright because I was okay then. I just tore that off, and put a new clip in.

DAN: Had the Japanese hung around a little longer, you might not have been alright. Ha, ha.

ROBERT: That's right. Yes. If I had needed another shot, was empty. Then, I walked down to the lieutenant to tell him that if I only had the machine gun, I think we could have done a lot better than we did. And about that time, they opened-up again. They had not retreated, they had gone over to the other side of the road (about thirty yards or forty yards), and all laid-down on the other side; and where our mortar sergeant went out there (I guess he was a sergeant) with his binoculars, the Japs shot one of 'em, and he fell in the other guys arms—there were two of 'em out there. And that's when he was hollering for help. And that's when I ran out there to help him. And when I ran out to him, between our line and their line, I bent over to pick up his legs—the other guy got shot, and he went down.

DAN: So you were getting the ...

ROBERT: While I was getting the legs, he had the arms. The guy fall right back in his arms. And I bent over to get the legs, then he took shots. So, I just fell to the ground and looked at him (the one who was holding him), and he was already dead. You can tell he was dead. So, I start dragging the other guy back from ...

DAN: Meanwhile, there's bullets whizzing all around you?

ROBERT: Bullets are going all around, I presume from both sides, I hope, but no machine gun fire.

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DAN: Was it kicking-up dust around you?

ROBERT: One hit my helmet, hit a rock or coral in front of me, and broke the tooth.
Came back and ...

DAN: That tooth, right there?

ROBERT: Yeah. Broke that teeth off right there. So, I drug him a ways, and then I got hit.

DAN: Where did you get hit next?

ROBERT: In the leg, here.

DAN: By a rifle?

ROBERT: A piece of a rifle or a piece of a hand grenade. I had the piece home. It's quite small—about as big as your fingernail.

DAN: You mean they were close enough to be throwing hand grenades at you?

ROBERT: Oh yes. I looked back. I saw them standing there, shooting at me—shooting at us.

DAN: What prompted you to go out there and rescue this man?

ROBERT: I don't know. I have no idea, other than he hollered for help.

DAN: You didn't think about it? You just instinctively [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: I just jumped up and went out to help him.

DAN: Where was he wounded at?

ROBERT: The best I can figure, right through the stomach area someplace.

DAN: So he was in considerable pain?

ROBERT: Oh yes, he was moaning and groaning. He was hurting bad.

DAN: He was a young guy like you?

ROBERT: I didn't really know.

DAN: You didn't know this man?

ROBERT: No, uh huh. If I did, I don't remember if I did.

DAN: He was just a Marine that was wounded.

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ROBERT: Yeah, but he was in a different unit than I was.

DAN: Well after you got hit in the leg, then what happened?

ROBERT: Well I kept dragging him to get both of us out from between the two lines.

DAN: How far was the line from where he was?

ROBERT: About ... Where we were, back to our line was about, maybe, thirty, forty feet.

DAN: It probably could seem like 300 or 400 miles, under fire, huh?

ROBERT: I was trying to move fast, but I wasn't having much luck. And when I got hit, it was just like somebody slapping you in the face. It wasn't any real big owie.

DAN: The one that took your tooth?

ROBERT: Yeah, I just spit coral and [OVERLAPPING] ...

DAN: What about the one that hit your leg?

ROBERT: That's what I meant. It was just like somebody slapping you in the face.

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: It wasn't one that [INDISCERNABLE]. But I did get him back to the hole, and pulled him into a foxhole. And I got in there too, but we could still see the Japs shooting at us; ...

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: ... and so I crawled to another hole; and during the time I was dragging him, he was hit a few more time—he was.

DAN: Even though he was in a foxhole?

ROBERT: No, before I got to a foxhole he was hit a few more times, so it could be that he saved my life by taking the extra bullets.

DAN: Did he make it?

ROBERT: I don't know. I never did. I've been asked that question. I have no idea. I do know he was a Mexican boy.

DAN: Is that right?

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ROBERT: Yeah. Uh huh. I remember that.

DAN: Do you remember his name?

ROBERT: No.

DAN: How did you find out he was Mexican-American?

ROBERT: I just knew he was Mexican-American.

DAN: Just looking at him?

ROBERT: Yeah, yeah. I'm from California.

DAN: Sure, sure. And you've never known whether this guy made it or not?

ROBERT: I don't know.

DAN: What was your condition?

ROBERT: I crawled to another hole. I was alright to get away from the area there, and draw them. I wasn't thinking of drawing the fire, other than just to get away from there, too. He was safe. There wasn't room for two of us. And, I went into another hole, and there was a medic, a Corpsman there.

DAN: How fortuitous!

ROBERT: Yes, yes.

DAN: Well, unlike Tarawa, where your Canteen, and you felt this dampness, this time could you feel [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Oh yeah.

DAN: ... the blood ...

ROBERT: Hot.

DAN: ... and it's burning wounds.

ROBERT: Yes, and the blood was real hot. It was just gushing out. As soon as I stopped, it was just shooting ...

DAN: Had it hit an artery, or?

ROBERT: No, just a lot of liters in there.

DAN: Yeah.

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ROBERT: And when he put the packet that we carry, with powder and a Band-Aid; he put that on, the blood just went straight through that. And he moved downhill, away from the fire, downhill. He couldn't do anymore for me.

DAN: So how did you eventually get to the field hospital?

ROBERT: They, right away, a machine gun had come around. They brought down at the bottom of the hill, and finished-off the rest, or chased 'em away, or whatever happened there. It was right near that Hari Kari [SOUNDS LIKE] Can Gulch, or something.

DAN: Okay.

ROBERT: And, ...

DAN: Have you been back there to see the area?

ROBERT: You can't find it. There's a sign that says, "Hari Kari Gulch" on a map, rather, but we can't find the location [OVERLAPPING] ...

DAN: It's all overgrown. [OVERLAPPING] It's different, right, then ...?

ROBERT: [SOUNDS LIKE] Kangatato, or Tonga Tonga Tree; Tanga Tanga ...

DAN: Whatever they are, there's a lot of 'em, right?

ROBERT: Yeah. They brought up a jeep to take me back. It was one of these ambulance jeeps. They have about four stretchers or three stretchers on them. And they put myself and two others on there; and there was a lieutenant that was wounded, who rode as kind of like a "shotgun" for the driver. And he came off that hill lickety-split. And that's the only time that I can really say I was frightened, ...

DAN: Is that right?

ROBERT: ... because of the loose guns running around—loose Japanese running around. They evidently hit a few of these jeeps coming down, because the drivers was, "Hang on, we're going!"

DAN: Going like ... So that they were a moving target rather than ...

ROBERT: Being overgrown in some areas, they can ...

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DAN: And you were strapped-down to that thing?

ROBERT: Oh yeah—into one of those steel stretchers that they have on there.

DAN: To you get to the field hospital, and they go to work on you?

ROBERT: Right away. As soon as I got back there, they unloaded us; and they came around and checked each one of us. They cut our clothes off us, you know—just up each leg, and up—so you don't have to move, and looked at it and put an evacuation tag on me, and threw a blanket over me, and put me on an amphibious "duck," I think they called it; and took me out to a hospital ship where, subsequently, operated on me aboard ship before we got to New Caledonia.

DAN: Even today, are there any pains or anything related to the [OVERLAPPING] ...

ROBERT: Not related to the wound.

DAN: Is there a pretty good scare there, I suppose?

ROBERT: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DAN: Well, because of what you did, you were nominated for the Silver Star.

ROBERT: Yes, uh huh.

DAN: When did you find out about all that?

ROBERT: When they took me to the field hospital, Marine Corps [SOUNDS LIKE] Cameroy came up and said, "could he take my picture?" I said, "Sure." Evidently, one of them had told him what I had done, so he followed, and he took a series of pictures of me, from the hospital out to the hospital ship. Then, when I was in the hospital, another one of our guys showed up later on, who had gotten wounded on Tinean, and told me that they had written-up a recommendation an award. And, I didn't receive word until many months later, after I was out of the Corps.

DAN: Did those pictures ever appear in the press?

ROBERT: They did send me three.

DAN: Oh, you have them?

ROBERT: I brought 'em for you there.

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DAN: Oh good, well ...

ROBERT: Yeah, they brought three to ... They sent me three, rather. I brought 'em. There are a number of them that they still have.

DAN: Well, you must be fortunate to survive that, but also proud that you won the medal?

ROBERT: Very much so, yes. The Marine Corps didn't give Silver Stars out, nor Navy Crosses, very often.

DAN: So odd, just before here, I had a Navy Cross and I have you here. I suspect that ... Was your war over at that point?

ROBERT: At that point in time, I didn't know it, but it was.

DAN: Yeah, so it all ended here in Saipan for you?

ROBERT: Yeah, uh huh.

DAN: And you were discharged before the war ended, or after the war ended?

ROBERT: Yes, before the war was over.

DAN: And you went back to home?

ROBERT: I went back to Oakland, California, to the Naval Hospital—Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, and then transferred right to Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

DAN: Glenwood Springs? For therapy?

ROBERT: For just recoup, and ...

DAN: You know, Glenwood Springs is a pretty famous place for recouping?

ROBERT: Now, I imagine it is, too.

DAN: Well, I'm not sure if you're aware of it, but ... I'm trying to think of the very famous gunfighter that was there. He was with Wyatt Earp—Doc Holiday ...

ROBERT: Oh, he was there at the Springs [OVERLAPPING]?

DAN: Glenwood Springs. And we went thee to recoup, because he was suffering from consumption. It eventually killed him. He's buried in Boot Hill, above Glenwood Springs.

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ROBERT: Didn't know that.

DAN: Yeah, right there.

ROBERT: Yeah.

DAN: Well, when you went back to Oakland eventually, did you get the hero's parade at all, and all that other stuff?

ROBERT: Oh no. No, uh huh.

DAN: So you go got your ...

ROBERT: The war was still on, and no one knew, and I didn't even know I was even going to be awarded anything.

DAN: How did you get your Silver Star?

ROBERT: Well, I was ... They just wrote me a letter; gave 'ya a copy; said I'd been awarded a Silver Star, and then they mailed it to me.

DAN: And there was no formal presentation?

ROBERT: I believe there could have been, ...

DAN: Yeah.

ROBERT: ... but I guess I chose not to go to it. I would say that was it, because they were still doing it over on Treasure Island.

DAN: An incredibly brave thing.

ROBERT: Yep, so it came through the mail.

DAN: Do you look at ... I'm sure most of the people I've talked to that ... Are you surprised that you're a hero?

ROBERT: Well, not a hero that some say. I'm a hero because I was with the Marines. We all did what we were out here to do—and the Army, and the Navy, and the Air Corps. That, I feel like I'm a hero, not because of one action—one particular five minutes of my life.

DAN: Where they say, "uncommon valor was commonplace," ... You saw a lot of, probably, guys who could've been awarded metals here, as well, right?

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ROBERT: One, if you don't mind, I'll tell you of one.

DAN: Sure.

ROBERT: Earlier we had a firefight where they had snuck-in to her all night long, and they'd shoot star flares at [SOUNDS LIKE] AV. Came in, and you'd close your eyes; a flare would go off. They'd watch; look in front of us, to see if anybody's crawling in. They would crawl in during the night, ...

DAN: Infiltrating?

ROBERT: ... and finally, when they got close enough, they're just up and attack. Happened one night, June 25, exactly.

DAN: Anniversary of the Battle of Little Big Horn.

ROBERT: Is that what it was?

DAN: June 25th, yes.

ROBERT: We had our own battle that night. Early morning, again. Again, early morning.

DAN: About 5:00 in the morning?

ROBERT: Yes. It had to be, because it was still kind-of more than ... It was darker than when I was shot.

DAN: Um hum.

ROBERT: And, they started with the grenades and charges. Guy in my squad next to me, a grenade went into his foxhole. There was three in his foxhole. And in my foxhole, where I was with my assistant gunner, he got bayoneted in the foot—the assistant gunner. The other guy (where the grenade went in) rolled on the grenade to save the other two. His name is [SOUNDS LIKE] Asperson.

DAN: And you were witness ...

ROBERT: That's a hero.

DAN: That's one of three that were given here. Did you know him?

ROBERT: Oh yeah, he was in my squad.

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DAN: What kind of guy was he?

ROBERT: Typical young boy, like all of us. We called him “egg head.”

DAN: Why did you call him “egg head?”

ROBERT: His head [INDISCERNABLE] ...

DAN: And you kidded him, and ...

ROBERT: Oh sure. We all had names. I was a “prune picker.”

DAN: “Prune picker?”

ROBERT: California, you know. Anyway. Now that’s a hero.

DAN: Yeah. That was hand-to-hand fighting that night?

ROBERT: Um hum.

DAN: That’s gotta be the most terrifying experience, when you’re right face-to-face?

ROBERT: Yeah, you just do what you’re trained to do.

DAN: Who buried Asperson?

ROBERT: We moved out. I don’t know. I don’t know. Shortly after that we “saddled-up,” and moved out. I don’t know.

DAN: Did you see that?

ROBERT: Yeah. It was right next to me there. It was all next to me, yeah.

DAN: And what ... Somebody yell, “grenade,” and ...

ROBERT: Well, yeah. They were throwing “right and left,” and, ...

DAN: He just jumped on it?

ROBERT: He just rolled on it, because it hit in his hole, he just rolled over on it to protect the other two guys. Actually, he pulled it under. He rolled over, and just pulled it. And he stayed alive. He didn’t die immediately. He talked for, what I understand, a while. And we moved out, and the Corpsman talked to him; subsequently died.

DAN: Gees. How old was he?

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ROBERT: I'd think about nineteen. I'm not sure. I think about nineteen—maybe eighteen.

DAN: And that's your definition of a hero, huh? What brought you back to Saipan?

ROBERT: One lives with something like this for this long. There's a time when you come to the "end of a book," you've got to close it. This is my book.

DAN: So you came back to close the book of ...

ROBERT: Of this part of my life.

DAN: You came back with a lot of other veterans.

ROBERT: Um hum. Yeah.

DAN: That was a pretty proud moment yesterday, when all the people turned out, and you guys marched down the boulevard.

ROBERT: Very proud. Very proud ...

DAN: The people ...

ROBERT: ... of the people.

DAN: Yeah. [OVERLAPPING] The memorial was dedicated yesterday. How do you feel about that memorial?

ROBERT: Wonderful. I hope it doesn't fall into disrepair, as they said, which things like this have happened in the past. I don't think it will for some reason. I don't think people like yourself—young people—are gonna let it die, who are knowledgeable of what happened then.

DAN: Well, it's under the care, now, of the National Park Service, and I'm sure that they will do a good job of taking care of it. And the people here seem to be very interested in taking care of it. They sure turned-out for you guys yesterday.

ROBERT: Wonderful, yeah.

DAN: Have you been up to see the memorial at all?

ROBERT: Yes, I was there when they opened it. Then I went up and looked at my [OVERLAPPING] name.

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DAN: Did you see Asperson's name?

ROBERT: Oh yes.

DAN: And that was part of "closing that book?"

ROBERT: Hum?

DAN: That was part of "closing the book?"

ROBERT: It's absolutely, there. I was hoping to run into someone else I knew, but we were shot up so bad—the 6th Regiment. This is ... I'll give 'ya ...

DAN: How many casualties?

ROBERT: Fourteen hundred and ninety-five. No. Yeah. One thousand, four hundred and ninety-five. The most of any regiment.

DAN: How many were in the regiment?

ROBERT: I don't remember right now.

DAN: Gees, but tremendous casualties.

ROBERT: These are government figures, they're not one that I dreamed-up or ... They're right there at the monument. You can go in and look at the book—look it up. Add-up. We had more losses than any other individual units had. Immediate losses—casualties—like the 105, 127th; but, the collective losses the 6th Marines took the brunt of it.

DAN: So what does this mean to my generation? What does your generation pass-on to us. What do you want us to remember?

ROBERT: Not to let it happen again, if it's possible. All these firefights all over the world. If we can stay out of them, let's stay out of them. I don't see any reason for us to subject younger people like yourself and the children after you to come to something like this. There has to be a way of negotiating it—a peaceful settlement. We don't need this kind of stuff. The Japanese didn't need it either. I saw some waiving to us down there. I just thought that they were here for their [INDISCERNABLE]. I hope they were.

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DAN: Yeah. How do you feel about the Japanese now?

ROBERT: Are you referring to animosity or something?

DAN: No. Just how do you feel about those veterans and all of them? What is your ...

ROBERT: I respect them. I admire them. I really do. They did what they were supposed to do. I did what I was supposed to do. The conclusion was, we both did it well.

DAN: Did you go to the dinner that was hosted by the Japanese veterans at the [INDISCERNABLE] ...

ROBERT: Didn't know they had one?

DAN: Would you have gone?

ROBERT: Absolutely, if I was invited, I would have gone. I sure would.

DAN: Is that part of what you'd call, "closing the book's about?"

ROBERT: Absolutely, yeah.

DAN: Well, ...

ROBERT: The end of the chapter.

DAN: Well, this is the end of our chapter, and I really want to thank you. It's been a learning experience for me.

ROBERT: Thank you for listening to an old man, really.

DAN: Well, ...

ROBERT: Really appreciate it.

DAN: You're not an "old man." Among cultures, the elderly are well respected. And, among our culture, it's so often that those that were the young men of World War II, and the young women of World War II are not as respected. And perhaps these oral history interviews that we've been conducting; and people will be watching here on T.V., will shed light that you are the people that we look to for the knowledge you've acquired. Maybe this interview will share that. Thank you very much.

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ROBERT: Thank you very kindly. Appreciate it.

[END AUDIO]